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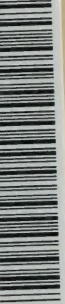
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COMMON FEATURES OF FAMILY ABUSE

by David Finkelhor



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COMMON FEATURES OF FAMILY ABUSE

DAVID FINKELHOR

There are actually very few professionals and researchers whose work reflects an interest in family violence and abuse as a whole. For the most part, one finds in this field people who concern themselves with either spouse abuse or child abuse or sexual abuse as individual problems, not all of them together.

If one looks around the country, one can see separate groups of people talking about, writing about, lobbying for, and intervening in each of these separate areas. Each problem has its separate set of agencies, separate set of theories, and separate history of how it was "discovered." Perhaps most seriously, in this day of waning public policy interest and waning public resources for social problems, there are sometimes bitter rivalries and political infighting among the proponents of these separate problems, as each tries to get policymakers to give priority to their particular kind of family abuse.

It may be important, both for the benefit of research and theory, and also to counteract some of the divisive tendencies, for researchers on the disparate forms of family violence to see what they can find in the way of commonalities. That is one of the purposes of this volume of research and theory devoted to the variety of forms of family violence. It is also the purpose of this introductory chapter, which will attempt to point out some of the insights to be found from examining the commonalities and also differences among forms of family violence and abuse.

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ABUSE AS ABUSE OF POWER

One commonality among forms of family abuse lies in the power dynamics of these situations. What we call abuse within the family is not simply aggression or injury committed by one family member against another. Family abuse is more precisely the abuse of power.

In part, this is the way abuse is defined. We do not classify as abuse the young child's lashing out at his mother when she deprives him of something he wants. We consider abuse to be a situation where a more powerful person takes advantage of a less powerful one.

Simple abuse of power is not even the full story. Even within the range of behaviors we define as abuse, the most common patterns in family abuse are not merely for the more powerful to abuse the less powerful, but for the most powerful to abuse the least. This is an interesting commonality: Abuse tends to gravitate toward the relationships of greatest power differential.

This principle is clearest in sexual abuse of children. The most widespread form of reported sexual abuse consists of abusers who are both male and in authority positions within the family victimizing girls in subordinate positions (Finkelhor, 1979, 1982c). This is a case of abuse across the axis of both unequal sexual power (males victimizing females) and unequal generational power (the older victimizing the younger). Abuse of boys by males appears to be much less common, and abuse of either boys or girls by female family members is extremely rare in comparison.

In physical child abuse a similar principle of the strongest victimizing the weakest operates. First, statistics show that the greatest volume of abuse is directed against the most powerless children, those under the age of six (Gil, 1979; Maden and Wrench, 1977; Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz, 1980). Moreover, the statistics should also probably be interpreted to show the more common vulnerability to be at the hands of the more powerful parent, the father. Although raw statistics tend to show roughly equivalent numbers of pure incidents of physical child abuse committed by men and women (American Humane Association, 1978; Maden and Wrench, 1977), these figures are deceptive because they do not take into account the fact that women spend a great deal more time with children than do men. If we were to calculate vulnerability to abuse as a function of the amount of time spent in contact with a potential abuser, I think we would see that men and fathers are more likely to abuse.

In the case of spouse abuse, too, again the strongest are shown to victimize the weakest. Research by Straus et al. (1980), for example, shows that in families where a woman has less power by virtue of not being in the labor market, by virtue of being excluded from participation in decision making, and by virtue of having less education than her husband, she is at higher risk of abuse. Once again, abuse gravitates to the greatest power differential.

This suggests the need for more research on the dynamics of power and how it operates in facilitating all forms of family abuse.

ABUSE AS A RESPONSE TO PERCEIVED POWERLESSNESS

Although family abuse is behavior of the strong against the weak, some people who have clinical experience with abusers sometimes find this an ironic description. Many abusers give a sense of being pathetic and ineffectual, not always people who would be described in objective terms as socially powerful.

This is another commonality among the different kinds of abuse: Although they are acts of the strong against the weak, they seem to be acts carried out by abusers to compensate for their perceived lack of or loss of power. In the cases of spouse abuse and the sexual abuse of children, this attempt to compensate is often bound up in a sense of powerlessness, particularly with regard to masculine ideals in our society. Men, it has been noted, often start to beat their wives when their wives try to assert themselves in some way or establish some degree of independence (Gelles, 1974). It has also been noted that men often start to sexually abuse their children when they are unemployed or failing financially or have suffered some other setback (Meiselman, 1978). Reflecting a similar theme, it has been observed

that the physical abuse of children tends to start with a feeling of parental impotence (Spinetta and Rigler, 1972). Mothers resort to violence, for example, when they sense that they have lost control of their children and of their own lives.

These are all examples of the uses of abuse to compensate for a perceived lack or loss of power. However, the abuse may not always be instrumental (i.e., intended to restore power): it may also be expressive. Abuse can be a way of venting anger against another family member who is seen in some way as responsible for that loss of power. Or it can be a way of trying to regain control by using coercion or exploitation as the resource for having one's will carried out. In either case, the abuse is a response to perceived power deficit. I suggest that this is another interesting feature of power dynamics in family abuse that should receive greater theoretical attention.

SHARED EFFECTS ON VICTIMS

Another important way in which all family abuse is tied together is in the effect it has on its victims. There are striking similarities in how the victims of family abuse experience their situations. These characteristic responses stem in part from the nature of families and family relationships and do not occur to such an extent in victimization that occurs outside the family.

All forms of family abuse seem to occur in the context of psychological abuse and exploitation, a process victims sometimes describe as "brainwashing." Victims are not merely exploited or physically injured: their abusers use their power and family connection to control and manipulate victims' perceptions of reality as well. Thus abused children are told that they are bad, uncontrollable, and unlovable (Herbruck, 1979). Abused wives are persuaded by their husbands that they are incompetent, hysterical, and frigid (Walker, 1979). Sexually abused children are misled to believe that their father's sexual attentions are normal and testimony of his great and genuine affection (Armstrong, 1978).

This brainwashing that accompanies (with) family abuse is potent because families are the primary group in which most individuals construct reality. Family members often do not have enough contact with other people who can give them countervailing perceptions about themselves. The distortion of reality and self-image is generally one of the most devastating effects of family abuse.

One result of the psychological manipulation common among all types of family abuse is the tendency among victims to blame themselves. It is difficult for victims to avoid identifying with the rationalizations of the abuser in accounting for what is happening to them. They commonly see themselves as having provoked the abuse or having deserved it, no matter how severe or arbitrary the abuse seems to have been.

Thus, it is not uncommon to hear abused women say things like, "I needed it," "I provoked him," "I was being a bad housekeeper and a bad mother" (Gelles, 1974). Among children one often hears, "My dad would lay into me but I needed it to keep in line." Sexual abuse victims report thinking to themselves, "I must have been leading him on," "It was because my own needs for affection were so strong that I didn't make him stop." Although victims of violence and exploitation in other settings also blame themselves, it is particularly severe for victims in families, where the abuser is an influential person who has had a powerful effect on shaping a victim's perceptions.

One additional result of abuse in the family context is that many of the victims often maintain a rather incredible allegiance to their abusers in spite of all the damage they do. Many battered wives profess that they love their husbands, that they know their spouses really love them and that abuse is evidence of that (Gelles, 1974). Many victims of sexual abuse insist they are more angry at their mother for not protecting them than at their father who had sex with them for years despite their protestations (Herman and Hirschman, 1977). This attachment to the abuser is often combined with a belief that the abuse will stop if only the victim could reform herself. "If I could only be a better housewife," says the abused women, "he would stop beating me" (Walker, 1979). "If I could only be a good little girl my father would stop punishing me," thinks the child.

Another common pattern among abuse victims is the extreme sense of shame and humiliation they harbor and the belief they have that other people could not possibly understand or identify with them. They often think they are the only ones who have undergone this kind of experience (Butler, 1978). They go to great lengths to keep it secret and often suffer from the sense of stigma and isolation.

In addition, there is a kind of entrapment that stymies the victims of all kinds of family abuse. The abuse often goes on over an extended period of time and the victims have difficulty either stopping it, avoiding it, or leaving entirely. This is one thing that people unfamiliar with family abuse are continually amazed by: victims of spouse abuse, child abuse, and sexual abuse often do not try to escape their abusers. In fact, in many instances, they want to go back and go to great lengths to protect their abusers from outside intervention (Gelles, 1976).

This entrapment is connected to the unequal power balance in most abusive situations, to the lack of social supports that are available to victims of abuse, and also to our potent ideology of family dependency, which makes it difficult for victims to contemplate surviving outside their family, no matter how abusive it is. This entrapment process common to all kinds of family violence has not been adequately researched and articulated in a way that accurately represents how it is experienced by the victims. It clearly deserves more attention.

Of course, as a final area for research on the common experience of victims of family abuse, there is the question of their long-term effects. Victims of the different kinds of family abuse report surprisingly similar long-term patterns: depression, suicidal feelings, self-contempt, and an

inability to trust and to develop intimate relationships in later life (Herman and Hirschman, 1977; Walker, 1979). Such effects might well be the common result of the experience of being betrayed, exploited, and misused by someone on whom they were profoundly dependent. More in-depth investigation can be conducted on the common effects of abuse within families.

SHARED CHARACTERISTICS OF ABUSING FAMILIES

Still other things tie various forms of abuse together. Some of the available research, for example, shows that the type of family situation in which one kind of abuse occurs is also the type of family situation in which other abuse occurs. For example, all forms of abuse appear to be higher in the lower socioeconomic strata (Finkelhor, 1980; Pelton, 1981; Straus et al., 1980). All forms of abuse appear to be more common in families where unemployment and economic deprivation are serious problems (Meiselman, 1978; Straus et al., 1980). There is some evidence that all forms of abuse are more common in families that are more patriarchally organized (Finkelhor, 1981; Gelles, 1974; Meiselman, 1978; Star, 1980; Straus et al., 1980). And all forms of abuse have been associated with families that are isolated and that have few community ties, friendships, or organizational affiliations (Finkelhor, 1978, 1981; Garbarino and Gilliam, 1980; Gelles, 1974; Straus et al., 1980).

Not enough research has yet been done to decide to what extent the presence of one form of abuse is a good predictor of the presence of another. But there are suggestions of some high correlations. In particular, the National Survey on Family Violence (Straus et al., 1980) found evidence that men who abuse their wives are much more likely to abuse their children and vice versa. The connection between sexual abuse and physical abuse or spouse abuse, however, is less well established. From case histories we know that sexual abuse victims do report having been beaten and having watched their mothers been beaten by their fathers, but no strong empirical evidence yet exists. So although we can say there are commonalities in the social characteristics of abusing families, we do not know to what extent they actually are the same families.

COMMONALITIES IN SOCIAL RESPONSE

One of the most interesting commonalities shared by the various forms of family abuse is the way in which they emerged as social problems. Even though each emerged separately at a somewhat different moment and in response to somewhat different political pressures, each type of family abuse has gone through a similar evolution as a social problem. For example, all of the abuses emerged as social problems from historical contexts where they had been minimized and where people believed that they did not occur frequently. It is now recognized that all of these forms of abuse occur with great frequency in the general population (Finkelhor, 1979; Straus et al., 1980).

Moreover, when these forms of abuse began first to come to public attention, in all cases they were analyzed as extremely pathological behaviors. Incest offenders were seen as backwoods degenerates and feeble-minded freaks (Gebhard, Gagnon, Pomeroy and Christenson, 1965). Child beaters were seen as

depraved (Gelles, 1979). Wife beaters were seen as alcoholic rogues and psychopaths and were considered to come from only extremely lower class and disorganized families (Walker, 1979). Today research sees these offenders as far less deviant than they were once viewed.

Another similarity in the popular mythology around all of these problems was the tendency to implicate the victims of the abuse as well as, or rather than, the offenders. The tendency was perhaps the strongest in the case of spouse abuse. Victims were described clinically as provoking, asking for it, women with masochistic needs for bullying spouses (Gelles, 1976). Early analyses of the problem of sexual abuse had great similarities. Abused children were seen as seductive and flirtatious to such an extent that they brought the sexual abuse on themselves (Armstrong, 1978).

Perhaps this tendency to blame the victim was weakest in the history of the concern about physical child abuse. It was harder to blame a one-, two-, or three-year-old child than an adolescent or adult woman. But even in this case one can find evidence of a belief that abused children were, in fact, extremely aggressive and provoking and if it had not been for their waywardness, they would not have been abused. In all cases these "blaming the victim" stereotypes took a long time to abate and continue to reappear from time to time in various guises.

In each of the kinds of abuse, a social movement arose which drew attention to the abuse that was occurring (Finkelhor, 1979; Pfohl, 1977). But in each case some ambiguity remained about how to define the normative boundaries of the abuse. In the case of child abuse, there remains much public ambiguity about where to draw the line between what is often referred to as strict discipline and child abuse (Straus et al., 1980). In the case of spouse abuse, there is a belief among large segments of the population and even the professional community that certain forms of violence between couples, such as slapping or pushing, is normative and should not be labeled spouse abuse. In the case of sexual abuse, there are large grey areas. Parents and even professionals are in substantial disagreement about whether bringing children into bed, parading in front of them naked, or exposing them to various kinds of explicit sexual material constitute a form of sexual abuse (Finkelhor, 1982). The ambiguity about normative boundaries is a problem common to all forms of family abuse.

DIFFERENCES AMONG FORMS OF ABUSE

I have discussed these commonalities among the different types of family abuse because I think they suggest some processes common to abuses within the family that should be studied as such. But even though these different types of abuse are similar in some ways, they are quite different in others. Contrasting the differences can also lead to some important insights. Often by contrasting characteristics of one form of abuse with another we note some interesting facts or processes which deserve an explanation.

Although there are many ways in which the different forms of family abuse are different, I want to focus on a few and illustrate how the "compare and contrast" approach can be used to theoretical advantage.

Age and Status of Victims

One important difference among the kinds of abuse concerns the age and social status of its principal victims. The victims of spouse abuse are adults. The victims of physical abuse are children, particularly young children. The victims of sexual abuse are somewhat older than the victims of physical child abuse; on average more of them fall into the preadolescent and adolescent age group (National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect, 1981).

Some important questions about the nature of each kind of abuse are suggested by comparing the ages of the principal victims. For example, should we expect that the effects of abuse occurring at a younger and more impressionable age will be more long-term, profound, and irreversible? This might suggest more serious long-term consequences attendant to physical child abuse.

Is popular mobilization around the problem affected by the relative degree of helplessness suggested by the stereotypical victim? In other words, is public alarm more easily aroused by abuse to a young child than to a mature adult? Is concern about the sexually victimized (stereo-typically adolescent) child more problematic because of the ambivalent attitudes people have about children of this age? The age range of typical victims may be useful in understanding some of the differences among types of abuse.

Differences in Support Groups

Another difference that is theoretically interesting in thinking about family abuse concerns the coalitions of groups that have been responsible for the promotion of these problems. Very different groups using very different approaches have mobilized to promote the different kinds of family abuse. For example, the concern about battered women has grown primarily out of the women's movement (Martin, 1976). Workers in this field are volunteers, and funding is shoestring and community-based. Concern about child abuse, by contrast, originated to a much greater extent among professionals, people with paid jobs relating to children, and has relied on state action, welfare bureaucracy, and federal funding to implement its objectives (Pfohl, 1977).

These groups have conducted the politics of their social problems in very different ways. They have also drawn on different theoretical frameworks to analyze these problems; the feminists casting family violence into a feminist theoretical framework, the professionals and child welfare workers casting their analyses of family violence more in terms of family disorganization and dysfunction.

These two approaches provide a fascinating study on contrasting histories of social problem mobilization, but little attention has yet been paid to this matter.

Sexual abuse is interesting from this perspective because it has been mobilized at the intersection of these two movements (Finkelhor, 1979, 1982b). It contains a delegation from both the feminist side and from the child welfare side. The presence of these two elements has provided the wherewithal for a

rapid deployment around the problem of sexual abuse, but it has also set the stage for some of the most important tensions within the community of concern about the problem.

Institutional Responses

Perhaps one of the other most important differences among types of abuse is the way in which public institutions, agencies, and professions have responded to them. If there is a somewhat unnatural separation among efforts to deal with each type of family abuse, the divergent institutional responses may be partly to blame. They have made it difficult to develop any concerted approach.

For example, physicians as a group played an instrumental role in recent years at least - in the mobilization around an intervention into the problem of child abuse (Pfohl, 1977). However, they have been much less prominently involved in the problem of sexual abuse - in part because there is little physical injury attendant to the problem of sexual abuse, and also because of the ambivalence to the problem that is the legacy of the medico-psychiatric ideology (Finkelhor, 1982b). Similarly, in regard to spouse abuse, physicians appear to have shown a low level of consciousness about the problem. In fact, they may contribute significantly to the continuing victimization of some women (Stark et al., 1979). The full reasons for these differential responses on the part of the medical community to different kinds of family violence and abuse have yet to be explored.

Similarly, the role of the police and prosecutors can be examined for the contrasting manner of their relationship to each of these forms of abuse. Police appear to be most heavily involved in the problem of spouse abuse, to a lesser extent in the problem of sexual abuse, and to a very minor extent in the problem of physical child abuse. Although it is in general true that the criminal justice system has been reluctant to get involved in domestic matters of any kind, in some cases of sexual abuse, for example, the response has been swift, massive, and extremely punitive. No one has yet really analyzed the variety of criminal justice responses to different areas of family violence and tried to account for some of these differences.

RESEARCH ON FAMILY ABUSE

In the matter of what approaches are used to study these issues, the field of family violence and abuse is probably best characterized here by its divergences rather than by its commonalities.

It is true that the research on all kinds of family abuse has been interdisciplinary, and this has been one of its great strengths. But this is not to obscure the fact that there has been a substantial degree of specialization by discipline. For example, medical research has focused almost exclusively on physical child abuse. Sociology, by contrast, has been more heavily represented in spouse abuse than in child abuse research. Psychology, which is well represented in all kinds of family abuse research, probably is more heavily involved in child abuse than in any of the others. These specializations have resulted from such factors as accessibility to research

subjects and certain theoretical affinities for certain problems within each discipline. But it is probably a healthy impulse to try to break down these specializations and encourage even more interdisciplinary mixing than currently exists.

There have also been divergences in the methodologies used to conduct research in the areas of family abuse. The patterns are somewhat difficult to gauge accurately, in part because there is a much longer tradition of research in the area of physical child abuse to date than there is in the area of either spouse abuse or sexual abuse. This longer tradition may account for the fact that prospective longitudinal studies and studies based on direct observation of family interaction have been carried out only on the subject of physical child abuse. Child abuse researchers have also been able to do more detailed and quantitative studies of abusers, while sex abuse and spouse abuse researchers have tended to concentrate to a greater extent on detailing the experiences of the victims.

In addition to their longer tradition of research, child abuse researchers have also benefited from a larger network of professionals involved in the identification and treatment of the problem. This has facilitated such things as access to subjects and follow-ups for longitudinal research. Sexual abuse and spouse abuse research, by contrast, have not had such large networks until recently and thus have had more difficulty setting up research designs like interaction studies and longitudinal research - which require extended contact with and ability to control to some extent the subjects in the research. The fact that the abusers in the case of sexual abuse and spouse abuse are so overwhelmingly male may have something to do with this difficulty, as may the greater involvement of the criminal justice system in these two problems.

CONCLUSION

I have barely scratched the surface in cataloging all of the comparisons that can be made among the different kinds of family violence and abuse. More than any particular idea I have advanced, however, I would like to emphasize the method I am proposing.

I believe there are important theoretical and methodological advances to be made by drawing comparisons and contrasts among the different kinds of family violence and abuse. I hope others carry on this enterprise and emerge with new insights and ideas for all in this field to pursue.

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